

‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ (3)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WHEN I introduced the topic of ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ a month ago, I said that one of the puzzles about the song has to do with its authorship. Who composed it? There are two equal claimants — in the south-west Ross corner, Seaforth’s family poet Murdoch Matheson (c. 1670 – c. 1757), a native of Kintail; and, in the north-west Ross corner, Norman (Tormod Bàn) MacLeod, from Lochbroom, who seems to have been a younger man.

What are their credentials? Let’s begin with Tormod Bàn. In the ‘New Statistical Account’ of the parish of Lochbroom, written in 1835, the Rev. Dr Thomas Ross said: “Norman McLeod, (alias *Tormaid Bàn*) the author of the well known song of *Caberféidh*, and of many other very popular and highly poetical productions, was a native of this parish.”

In ‘Memorabilia Domestica’, written about 1840 and published in 1889, the Rev. Donald Sage wrote: “This song was composed by Norman Macleod, a native of Lochbroom, in revenge against the Munros. His son, Eneas Macleod, was minister of Rogart, in Sutherland. I never met him, but with his widow and family I was acquainted intimately.”

This was also the opinion of John Mackenzie, writing in ‘Sàr Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach’ of 1841, except that he declared Tormod to be from Assynt. Yet another Ross-shire man, Professor W J Watson, writing in ‘An Gaidheal’ in 1930, said that ‘on this point . . . the testimony of Sage should be conclusive’.

Tormod had another son, Hugh, who was Professor of Church History in Glasgow University. They were educated in Aberdeen University, and the records of that University show that Eneas was connected with Assynt. It looks as if Tormod Bàn was born in Lochbroom but had moved to Assynt by the time Eneas was born about 1744. The two parishes are contiguous in any case.

On the other hand, in Peter Turner’s collection of Gaelic poetry, published in 1813, the poem is stated to be *leis a Bhard Mac Mhathan*, ‘by the Matheson poet’. The late Earl of Cromartie, who had a deep knowledge of Ross-shire traditions, stated in ‘A Highland History’ that the poem was ‘written by Matheson, Seaforth’s bard’.

And, as Professor Angus Matheson pointed out in ‘Gairm’ in 1954, there is testimony in favour of Murdoch Matheson from a source that seems to be earlier than any of these. This is the song ‘Dìomoladh Chabar Féidh’ (‘The Dispraise of Cabar Féidh’) by Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair (Alexander MacDonald, the famous poet from Moidart), who lived from about 1698 to 1770. The ‘Dìomoladh’ is almost certainly a product of the years around 1720; unfortunately it wasn’t published, as far as I know, until 1813, when it appeared in Turner’s collection.

The ‘Dìomoladh’ is a systematic rebuttal, from a MacDonald and Argyll (including Campbell) perspective, of the claims made for the MacKenzies in the ‘Moladh’. It shows no interest in the Munros, who are not even mentioned. But what concerns us for the moment is how it refers to the author of the ‘Moladh’.

*Gu bheil mi air mo ghéisgeadh
Le réicil an daimh Gharranaich,
Gun fhios nach ann sa bhùireadh
Air thùs thig do mhearan ort!*

“I really feel quite stunned / By the raving of the Carron stag, / For perhaps it was in rutting / That your madness originated!” This then is Lochcarron, very close to Matheson’s Kintail homeland. What is more, the following verse was added from oral tradition when the poem was published again in 1924:

*Bha thu gòrach, bhàirdein Shàilich,
Dol ’na dhàil no beantainn da —
Chan eil mìth no maith san rìoghachd,
Mur b’e ’n rìgh a bharantas,
Bheir air Clann Raghnaill éirigh
Le còir chéin no cheannairce
Mur dèanadh e thaobh truais le dedìn e
Nam biodh fòirneart ainneamh orr’.*

“You were foolish, my little Kintail poet, / To challenge him or take to do with him — / No one high or low in the kingdom, / Unless the king were his warrant, / Can make Clanranald rise / By right that’s distant or rebellious / Unless he did it willingly from pity / If they were under unusual oppression.” The cheeky label *bàirdean Sàileach* surely points straight at Murdoch Matheson.

According to Angus Matheson, when the ’15 was over, Murdoch helped Seaforth’s factor, Col. Donald Murchison, defend MacKenzie territory against the Forfeited Estates Commissioners. Together they collected rents to send to Uilleam Dubh in France. They also raised a force of MacKenzies which liberated Brahan Castle from the occupying Munros, and it was at this time that Murdoch composed ‘Cabair Feidh’.

Lochalsh tradition has it that the song was greatly resented by the Munros, who plotted to capture the poet. They surrounded him and were about to tie him hand and foot — *bha iad air thì ’na ceanglaichean daora docair’ a chur air* — to carry him off to Foulis when Murdoch declared that he would like to invite them to join him in a dram!

They brought him to a tavern and he called for a cask of whisky. He began sharing this out, starting at the inside of the table and working towards the door. Finally he gave a glass to the sentry. While this man was draining

it off, Murdoch struck him a mighty blow on the head with the cask and laid him senseless on the ground. He leapt past, locked the door and escaped to MacKenzie country.

John Mackenzie claimed, quite wrongly, that Tormod Bàn composed ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ in support of his friend and neighbour, MacKenzie of Ardloch, after William Munro of Achany (near Lairg) had plundered the Assynt shielings following the ’45. It’s not impossible that such a raid took place (either after the ’45 or after the ’15, which is much more likely). But as I showed last time, that’s not what the song describes. In fact, the song contains references which lead one to suspect that John Mackenzie simply misunderstood it — especially the two references to Assynt in the Munro country which would very forgivably be understood as denoting the Sutherland parish of the same name.

What is perfectly possible, however, is that Tormod Bàn composed the song about the large event in order to annoy Munro of Achany about the smaller one. Mackenzie’s next anecdote follows logically from this. Tormod Bàn and Achany were unacquainted with each other, he says, but Munro was extremely sore about the song, and made it known that the poet would forfeit his life for his insolence if ever they happened to meet.

And meet they did. Achany was called *Uilleam a’ Bhonaid Uidhir* from the grey bonnet which he always wore. One day Tormod Bàn, on his way to Tain, was sitting in the inn at Ardgay enjoying a meal of bread, butter, cheese and ale when a man wearing a grey bonnet walked in the door.

A quick word with the landlord confirmed Tormod’s worst suspicions. It was like a saloon-bar scene from a Western, except that (as so often happens in Gaelic stories) the weapons were not guns but poetry. Tormod went straight up to the man in the grey bonnet, drank to him, then offered him the cup, saying in impromptu verse:

*Aran is im is càis’
Mun tig am bàs air Tormod,
Is deoch do dh’fhear an rothaid —
'S cha ghabh na Rothaich fearg ris.*

“Bread and butter and cheese / Before death comes to Norman, / And a drink for the man of the road — / And the Munros will not be angry at him.” John Mackenzie chose to translate it in rhyme:

*Bread and butter and cheese to me,
Ere death my mouth shall close;
And, trav’ler, there’s a drink for thee,
To please the black Munroes.*

Achany liked the verse and drank the ale. When he discovered who the courteous stranger was he cordially forgave him, and the pair remained friends ever after. Years afterwards, the poet’s son Angus (Eneas), as a young licentiate of the Church, went to see Achany about a vacancy in the parish of Rogart. “And do you really think, Sir,” says Achany, “that I would use my influence to get a living for your father’s son? ‘Cabar Féidh’ is not forgotten yet.”

“No! And never will,” Angus replied. “But if I get the parish of Rogart, I promise you it shall never be sung or recommended from the pulpit there!”

“Thank you! Thank you!” says Achany. “That is one important point carried — you are not so bad as your father after all, and we must try to get the kirk for you!”

He gave Angus a letter to Dunrobin, and he got the appointment.

John Mackenzie (himself from Gairloch, halfway between Assynt and Kintail!) was acutely aware of the alternative claim to authorship of ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’. “It has been erroneously ascribed to Matheson, the family-bard of Seaforth,” he wrote. “But now for the first time, it is legitimately paternized, and the only correct edition, which has yet appeared, is here given. The song itself bears internal evidence that our history of its paternity is strictly correct; and our proofs in corroboration are numerous and decisive.”

By which he meant his anecdotes and the references in the song to Assynt, I suppose. On the other hand, Angus Matheson queried how likely an Assynt MacLeod would be to praise the MacKenzies so soon after the 1680s, when the latter had taken Assynt from the MacLeods by force and deception. “Wouldn’t it be more likely that the Earl of Seaforth’s own family poet would have composed such a song himself and that he had been present in the flesh?”

Angus Matheson went on to make a very interesting suggestion. There is more than one song to the tune ‘Cabar Féidh’, he pointed out. In the MacLagan collection of manuscripts, which dates from the late 18th century, there are two versions — the familiar one which I described in my last two articles, and a very different one indeed. “Who knows but that this may be the solution?” And Angus Matheson left it at that.

Next time I will look at the other ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ to see if this judgement of Solomon could be true. But I will also look more carefully at the ‘Diomoladh’ to try to work out exactly what it was that Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair was responding to.

WHFP 20 October 2000